



Luke 15:11-32

SLIDES TAKEN FROM THE KEITH GREEN VIDEO

We know the story – guy gets greedy, guy shuns his family, guy lives it up, guy loses his fortune, guy ends up in pigsty – and then he comes to his senses.

Jesus has given us a wonderful picture of someone who has lost their way but come to their senses and decide to seek the Father.

We usually use it to invite people that don't know Jesus to come to Him, but it's also a wonderful picture for someone who once walked as part of the family of God but for one reason or another drifted or walked away because Jesus is illustrating the fact that the Son of Man came to seek and save that which was lost – and that includes those that have lost their way.

Years ago we called them “backsliders” and when that became old-fashioned we called them “lapsed”. The current term is prodigals after the parable that was read to us just now.

If you look at the dictionary definition we see that it's this: Prodigal One who expends money extravagantly, viciously, or without necessity; one that is profuse or lavish in any expenditure; a waster; a spendthrift/ This very much reflects the man in our story.

Here's my definition of a Prodigal Christian: *Prodigal (Christian) One who has walked away from his/her faith and/or church and now worships nowhere. Someone who is wasting the opportunities, Promises and blessings that come from being a Christian.*

Like it or not we all know people who once enthusiastically embraced the Christian faith Some of you have heard me speak on prodigals on more than one occasion and wonder why I speak a lot about it, particularly as there are folk in the church that have been praying for and inviting people to church for years. All I'll say is this. There is a time to sow, but there's also a time to reap and I believe God is calling on us the prepare ourselves to reap. Prodigals – what are they. Why are you focussing on them? Need to reap, not just sow.

If we want to reap, then we need to understand why prodigals left in the first place, and what sorts of thing beings them back. Which is why we look in the Word of God and see what Jesus has said on the subject and we find the story of a prodigal who left but then returned. His actions

WHY DID HE LEAVE? We're not told much about why he left. We know he demanded his inheritance whilst his father was alive. IN Jewish law, a younger son was entitled to about a third of the estate as things stood. But the son was not entitled to it – it was bad form to demand it. The son would have been regarded as mercenary and unprincipled for treating his father in this way.

But clearly there was a problem with the father and here we see a and determined to make it on his own. He comes across keen to make it on his own, have a new life, meet friends.

WHY DO PEOPLE LEAVE CHURCH? It's a bit difficult to generalise but why do people leave church – and by that I mean leave church and cease to be part of a church fellowship. Here are a few we have come across that cover most eventualities:

- *problems in their relationship with God*
- *problems with church*
- *have other priorities for life*
- *just drifted away*
- *pressure from others not sympathetic with the faith or even persecution*

WHAT MADE HIM RETURN?

VERSES 15 *So he went to work for one of the citizens of that country, who sent him out to his farm to take care of the pigs. 16 He wished he could fill himself with the bean pods the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything to eat. 17 At last he came to his senses and said, "All my father's hired workers have more than they can eat, and here I am about to starve!"*

Sometimes it's impossible to move people from where they are comfortable in life. Nothing would have persuaded that man to go home when he was living it up. But being destitute made him ask questions about his life. LIST

- his circumstances changed – some his own fault, some just happened.
- he came to his senses
- he started to question his life

WHY DO PRODIGALS COME BACK TO CHURCH – what turns things around. Again the stories are difficult but here are a few reasons we know of that bring people back to their senses and turn back to Jesus. Actually they are much the same ones that bring people to Jesus in the first place:

- a change in personal circumstances
- a personal crisis that leads to realising one's own mortality
- the witness of Christian friends and relatives
- an encounter with God

WHAT CAN WE DO? Let's try to be practical here. If we are going to reap then there must be something we should be doing.

★ Recognise the issues are spiritual

- always be Christ-centred
- pray and wait on God
- see what God is doing
- recognise the power and works of the Spirit

It's not so much recognise what we can do, but start saying to God, "how do you want to use us to reach the people you've placed on our hearts."

★ Recognise Relationships

- help them on their journey home
- be Jesus to them – let your life be their challenge

★ Recognise the issues as a fellowship

Both the items above make sense and are exactly the same pieces of teaching I would give if you were seeking to reach anybody who doesn't know Christ. Recognise conversion is the work of the Spirit and recognise that we are here to speak to them, love them, get to know them and bring them to where God wants them. More practically though, how do we deal with the prodigal issues as a church? A group of us has been looking at this since January. But the issue of prodigals isn't something that is for the one or two interested people – it is for the church because it is from this fellowship people have walked and its to this fellowship that people are being called. So what is our way forward.

I believe that the communion table is the ideal place to bring these issues, because it is around this table that we meet – and it is around this table these folks God has laid on our hearts should also be meeting. I believe God is asking us to consider before Him three issues that we need as a fellowship to have a clear idea of His direction and will.

- how do we help Christians realise the importance of church?
- how do we encourage prodigal Christians back to church?
- how do we spot people who are becoming less interested in fellowship or reach those who have no interest at all?

I believe this is the challenge for us as we go from one Back to Church Sunday to the next. Christian people have walked from this church. In the course of our ministry we meet others who have walked from other churches. They no longer meet with other believers – yet the Father's heart yearns for them. Let's pray that we will have renewed enthusiasm to engage them, to walk with them

in their journey back to faith, to recognise what Jesus wants to do in their lives and encourage them back to Him. As a church, let's pray that God will give us the clear vision for what He wants us to be as the body of Christ.

Prayer

*Preached by Mark Reid
MRBC Felixstowe 5/10/09
© Mark Reid 2009*